Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection,
Medical Marijuana Program

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Executive Summary

Public Act 12-55, An Act Concerning the Palliative Use of Marijuana, was signed into law on May 31, 2012 (the “Act”). The department was then tasked with compiling regulations related to the programs operation. On October 01, 2012 the program started processing patient registrations. In April of the following year after months and countless hours of meetings the medical marijuana regulatory framework was operational. The program is now included in the Connecticut General Statute, under chapter 420f, “Palliative Use of Marijuana”.

The program is designed to enable truly sick patients to engage in the palliative use of marijuana while preventing marijuana from being misused or diverted from its medical purpose. The statute provides immunity from state criminal and civil penalties for physicians, patients, caregivers, dispensaries and producers who act responsibly in accordance with the law.

The Connecticut Medical Marijuana Program (CT-MMP) is a regulatory and licensing program within the Drug Control Division of the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection. The program is tasked with oversight of a new regulation allowing for patient treatment of certain debilitating medical conditions using medical marijuana. The medical marijuana program is responsible for regulatory oversight, patient registration, and setting medical marijuana related standards in Connecticut, including regulatory oversight and licensing of medical marijuana producers and dispensary facilities.

The program in collaboration with the IT Department was able to utilize existing online application processes and create some new ones, to design a fully functional online application portal. This includes coordinating physician license verification, patient eligibility determination, and fee processing. Physician certifications and patient registrations are a complete online only application process, with patient’s primarily completing their applications and payments online with an option to submit only supporting documents as well as payment by mail for processing.

The online application process allows for a scalable, robust and cost effective application management process. The most significant cost savings of doing business online is to the patient application portion of the program, which makes up a majority of the program application processing. With our online process the Department is able to process more applications in a given period. We are able to scale the workload as needed. This was a perfect solution for a new program with limited initial funding.
Business Problem and Solution Description

This program relies on physicians to make patient status determination and forward that information to the MMP program. Patients are then required to submit an application and supporting documents to the MMP program. The program then matches and verifies the submitted physician and patient information, ensures eligibility and issues registrations to the patients.

As with any new government program there were significant hurdles to overcome, information coordination, cost, scalability, reliability, and inefficiency. Currently, the greater majority of state government licensing is completed via a hardcopy process. Applications are submitted to the appropriate oversight agency and application details are transcribed into a database for record keeping, processing and determination. This process is expensive considering the cost of staff needed for manual application processing. As with any new program updating information in quick meaningful manner can be a nightmare. It’s difficult to scale workload without hiring additional staff. The inherit inefficiency of working with a manual process like paper and pen, like difficulty of coordinating information from multiple resources. As with any new program, there was limited time to implement the program. Another substantial factor to consider was financing. The program did not have a significant source of funding; this limited the number of initial staff brought on as well as the resources that could be utilized.

It was clear from the onset of this program the department would need to break from the norm and utilize a modern form of doing business. The plan for developing an electronic portal would begin to take shape. This would allow for the program be flexible to change, if modifications would need to be implemented adhoc. Coordination of new information can easily be implemented without requiring extensive outreach. This would also allow for the program to be easily scaled without requiring significant changes in staffing. Another benefit of an electronic application process is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week access to the application.

However, when dealing with short timelines and limited budgets it’s difficult to develop a tool that takes advantage of the elements previously mentioned without an extensive vetting process. It was clear an RFP for an online application portal was too costly, not only financially but also not timely. Time was of the essence, and a quick, ‘light’ portal needed to be developed to implement the system.

The Department contacted the Director of Management Information Solutions, Daniel Sears of CT Department of Administrative Services, Bureau of Enterprise Systems and Technology for assistance. Mr. Sears, an IT veteran with years of experience in enterprise information management, was able to quickly develop frame work for the online application portal.

The foundation of the program would require doctors, patients and caregivers access to be able to create a personal online registration. As previously noted multiple programs
would need to be utilized and synchronized in this experiment. Doctors would need to be verified as an eligible physician. That physician would then need to be able to confirm that their patient meets program criteria and issue a patient specific certification. A patient and/or caregiver would need to be able to create an individual secure profile similar to that of the physician. A mechanism would need to be in place linking the physician’s patient specific certification with the patient profile. The patient would need to be able to provide supporting documents and applicable fees. Finally, a registration would need to be issued and sent to the specific patient.

Within a week of proposing this project, the initial electronic portal began to take shape. Patients and physicians would use an existing secure business portal, currently used for general CT Government business, and create individual secure profiles for patients, physicians and caregivers. This allowed for secure access to the electronic portal being developed. Next, prior to a physician certifying a patient’s eligibility in the program, the physician’s credentials would be verified utilizing an existing Prescription Monitoring Program (requires all physicians to be verified and registered). Once completed the physician would enter the patient certification and patient specific information into a secure profile. The key linking patient and physician information would be the email address each patient would need to provide to the doctor during a medical visit. Patients without a working email address could have the physician create an alternate link utilizing a algorithm generated by the online portal. At this point the patient can register online, log into his/her application, complete the application, verify physician entered information, securely upload supporting documents in multiple recognized electronic formats (pdf, tiff, jpeg; a phone with photo capability can be utilized for this), and a low cost online credit card processing service is provided through Paypal business. Once the patient finished the application, MMP staff is verify the application, review supporting documents as well as verify payment of fee’s and issue a registration. A registration is produced from a secure dedicated pc with a DataCard printer attachment. The card contains limited patient information which is transcribed on an identification card.

Now came the challenging part of putting together an online application process and supporting it. Within a short period of time, Mr. Sears was able to create a fully functioning online application portal. He took advantage of already existing programs and online functions, tying them all together for a fully functional system. As with any good program, its strength comes from the support necessary to run it. Given Mr. Sears position he would not be able to provide day to day support. We again went back to our IT Department. Due to a merger with other departments, DCP had additional IT staff on hand. It was perfect timing to utilize seasoned IT veterans for this task.

The IT division, using dedicated IT staff, was able to provide the program with full program related support.
Significance

This program improves state government operations in many ways two of which play a significant role in day to day operations. First and foremost, efficiency, by reducing a significant portion of the data entry, applications can be processed expeditiously. Prior to this staff would spend an equal amount of time manually entering the data as they did verifying the data. With our program data entry is delegated to the applicant, this liberates the staff to verify the information which reduces application processing times by almost 50%. Second is productivity, doing more with less. By streamlining the process we are able to conduct business on par with private industry. Furthermore, our staff requirement to complete program duties is less than comparable staff requirements at similar programs in sister agencies.

These savings directly benefit government by allowing for an, adaptive, and cost effective program. Businesses (applicants) also benefit by having their expectations met or exceeded, and by reducing program cost which theoretically reduces the burden to run the program itself.

Benefit of the Project

The benefits of the program can be divided into two beneficiary categories: governmental and business.

Governmental benefits can be easily summarized by the following: efficiency, productivity and financial responsibility. Efficiency, the cost savings from government to business are immediate. By utilizing the online application process we are able save 4 days from the application process. Applicants upload supporting documents online which allows staff to process application as soon as an application is complete. The alternate to this is mailing the documents to the agency which takes a minimum of 4 days. Productivity, by empowering the applicants to upload documents and data enter information, the agency is able to focus on application reviews and approvals, rather than data entry. Also, an online application process allows for issues to be identified and corrected immediately, in some cases issues are virtually identified and can be corrected in real time, speeding up the approval process. The financial benefits were also clearly demonstrated in our example. By allowing agencies to utilize already existing departmental assets financially burdened programs (new program with no immediate revenue source) can find ways to responsibly complete the department’s mission.

Business benefits can be easily summarized by the following: expectation, satisfaction, and trust.
Expectation, the program matches already existing applicant expectations by services matching current business norms. Todays, savvy consumers expect the same type of service from the government as from any other business. Applicants are accustomed to sending information online and having immediate results. Our program matches applicant expectations with existing business norms. Satisfaction; many applicants have expressed their positive outcomes with us regarding our online process. Applicants are accustomed to government agencies taking a seemingly excessive amount of time to process any information. This is largely due to the overwhelming dependence of government on an archaic system of hardcopy applications in the digital age. Our system allows for turnaround of a complete correct application within 24 to 48 hours. An important factor in electronic government is trust which stems directly from reassurances of security and privacy. The quality of this depends greatly on educating staff, having strong protocols in place, and verification through audits.

As the comfort level of the general public for conducting electronic business increases with functions such as banking and healthcare, it’s important for government to follow suit. Many of current government business functions can be expedited electronically, via electronic form completion, online account management, and other services. This allows for increase in government productivity, efficiency and flexibility.